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ABSTRACT

Children's ability to understand the implied messages in indirect speech was investigated using a role play elicitation task. Subjects were asked to complete story endings using puppets for several scenerios involving a mother and her four children. In each of the stories the mother gives an indirect directive which is supposed to get the children to either stop doing something naughty or to help her do something. In addition, there were two control conditions, one in which the mother remained silent, the other in which the mother could not see the children. It was found that several properties of the role play task itself confounded the children's responses: (1) given the opportunity to build stories, older children tended to make exciting endings rather than follow predictable scripts; (2) children interpreted the scenerios in terms of their own personal experiences and would not engage the puppets in behavior they were unfamiliar with or considered inappropriate; (3) the more routinized the context of the scenerio, the less attention the child needed to give to the verbal directive in order to figure out what was expected of the characters in the story; and (4) it could not be determined whether the mother's indirect directive served to draw the child's attention to the problem that needed to be resolved, or whether the child was processing the intent of the mother's directive. Because of these problems, it was concluded that the role play technique was not suitable for studying children's understanding of indirect speech, and it was suggested that future studies using this technique anticipate the problems encountered in the present study. (Author/SS)

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Elicited Role-Play of Commands and Requests

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It is important to consider, in any kind of experiment, what the nature of your method is, since the method is, after all, the medium through which your data are filtered. And unless you understand how that filter works, you could end up not knowing what to make of your data, or worse, you could misinterpret your findings because of an interaction between the method you were using and the nature of the data you were collecting. This is what I'd like to talk about today. I'd like to tell you about our project examining the development of children's understanding of a very specific kind of speech, indirect speech, and what some of the consequences of using role play for this purpose were. So first, let me give you some background, then I'll describe the project, and then I'll spend the rest of the time talking about what we learned about the nature of role play, about children's sociolinguistic development, and the relationship between the two.

Background

One of the reasons people talk is to do things. You can tell someone to do something directly. like "Pick up your shoes!", or "Close the window!", or you can tell them to do something indirectly. By indirectly, I mean you don't explicitly tell them what it is that you want them to do for you, but you phrase it more subtlely. So that instead of saying "Pick up your shoes!", you could say "What are your shoes doing on the table?", or instead of saying "Close the window!", you could say "Brr!", and shiver. These are instances of indirect speech, because you never directly, or explicitly mentioned what it was you wanted done.

We are interested in finding out how children interpret indirect speech, and when they begin to understand that the message being conveyed in the indirect utterance is that the speaker wants something done. For example, it would be unusual for a 3 year old to understand what you wanted him to do if all you said was "Brr!", and didn't mention the window at all. But, on the other hand, when you ask a 10 year old "What are your shoes doing on the table?" and he answers "The Mexican hat dance.", you can be pretty sure he knows exactly what you're driving at, even though you didn't explicitly say that you wanted him to remove them. One of the aims of out project is to find out exactly what sorts of information

children rely on to interpret these indirect forms of speech, and understand that although the speaker didn't say so explicitly, what they wanted was for the child to do something.

Elaine (Andersen, 'Register Variation in Young Children's Role-Play Speech') was interested in children's knowledge of the speech appropriate for various roles, so she had her subjects act out relatively unconstrained and undirected scenes involving the roles she was interested in. Then she looked at what elements of what an adult notion of the register the children of different ages included in their role play (lexicon, prosody, topic of conversations, activities, gestures, and so on).

We were interested in a specific kind of language--indirect speech--that all sorts of people can use, so we didn't use role play to focus on register. We used role play as a context in which to imbed the indirect utterances we were focussing on. For example, if we wanted to see if the child would interpret "Are you throwing food?" as a directive to stop, we would imbed the utterance in a context where the children in a story were having a food fight in the living room, and the mother walked in. By building up a scene where someone actually used the utterance in question, we could look at the children's interpretations in a nearly natural setting. Since speakers rely heavily on pragmatic, situational information when interpreting indirect speech, we wanted to be able to manipulate the features in the context. We could do this by altering the scene that we set the utterance up with, thus changing the roles out subjects would have to play.

Also, by using role play, and puppets, we kept our subjects involved and interested for the full 45 minutes or so that the experiment took.

What we did in the experiment was this. We constructed a number of stories where a mother and her four children get involved in familiar situations (eating dessert, walking the dog, and so on), but we left the story endings open for the subjects to complete. We made puppets who looked just like the characters in the stories, and we had the subjects wear various puppetsas they role played, and told us what they thought was appropriate for the characters to do or say in the situations we contrived.

In each of the stories, a situation involving an indirect directive arose. For example, in some of the stories, the mother wanted her children

to stop doing something naughty, like throwing food in the living room. But instead of saying "Stop throwing food!", she said something less explicit, like "Are you throwing food?" Now you'll notice that "Are you throwing food?" could be interpret in either of two ways. It could be taken as an information question, meaning "I really want to know whether you are throwing food.", or it could be interpreted as an indirect directive to stop, as in "Are you throwing food?"(falling intonation). In the procedure, the intonation was always the same, the information question. We had the utterances recorded on Language Master cards which can hold a few sentences, and can be played easily, so that the intonation would always be the same. We chose the question intonation because in pilots we found that the directive intonation, as well as more explicit forms like imperatives, posed no problem--even the youngest children understood what was wanted all the time.

In addition to the naughty stories, there were five stories where the mother's indirect directive was supposed to get the children to help her do something (open a door, pick up a checker, and so on). So that when she wanted the child to pick up the checker that had rolled onto the floor, rather that saying "Pick up the checker", the mother would say "I can't find the checker."

In addition to these indirect utterances, we also had a control condition where the mother remained silent. We had another control condition where the mother didn't come into the room, or couldn't see what was going on, and she said her directive from another room, or from where she could not see what she was talking about. And finally, we had a silent/no see condition. We eliminated the voice (in the silent condition) to see how much the situation spoke for itself. In other words, would the children stop being naughty if the mother came in but didn't say anything? Or did they rely on her words for their interpretation of what should happen next? The reason we had a control condition where the mother spoke from another room was to see whether her words were enough to get them to stop, or at least to understand that she wanted them to stop. The condition where the mother was out of the room and said nothing served as an index of what the subjects thought of the situation without any directives or disciplinary elements at all. We wanted to see what the children made of the situation before we added in all of our trappings.

So in sum, we had basically four conditions: voice/see
voice/no see
no voice/see
no voice/no see

How can you tell what a child understands when such a story is told? Are they understanding the implicit directives that the mother gives? To find out, we tried to get the subjects to tell us what the children in the story would do next. We were using an eliciting method which relies on many of the elements of role play, even though our task was more constrained than say Elaine's (Andersen) role play techniques, where the children were freer to make up their own situations. We asked our subjects "What do you think Jack and Kate (two of the children in the stories) say next?" right after we played the utterance card (Are you throwing food?,e.g.) Then we would ask "What do you think Jack and Kate do next?" We hoped that if the subjects understood the indirect speech, this would be reflected in what they made the story characters do and say.

Now I'd like to mention four properties of role play that we found influenced the data we were able to collect.

1. Our role play task required of the subjects that they <u>build a story</u>, or at least the <u>ending</u> of a story. This produced some interesting results. The older children were very good at making up stories, and what they really enjoyed was playing with the endings. So whenever there was a logically predictable ending, they made sure that what they proposed in the way of an ending was unpredictable, just to be dramatic. The three year olds, on the other hand, weren't bored by conventional stories, so they'd suggest the expected ending. For example, if the story was that Jack and Kate were throwing flowers, and their mother came in and said "Are you throwing flowers?", the younger group would have Jack and Kate stop, whereas the older group would say they continued because it was fun. At first blush, this looks like the 3's are better at understanding indirect directives than the 7's. In fact, the 7's knew perfectly well what was expected of the characters in the stories. It was just that their interest in making dramatic endings to their role play obscured what we were interested in--namely their interpretation of the mother's indirect utterance.

Another example of this phenomenon occurred in a story where the mother was coming home from the store, arms full of grocery bags. As she nears the front door, she notices it's closed. We point this out to our 7;9 subject, and ask him what happens next. He says "They crash into the door and fall over", and laughs.

2. The second property of role play that interacts with our data collection is the type of experience the child has had with the role he is to adopt.

This property can be divided into two sub-parts. First, the degree to which the subject is familiar with the situation and the role affects what we can tell about their understanding of our indirect utterances. If the child isn't familiar with the role, he may not be able to comply with the directive because he doesn't know how to act. Let me illustrate. In one story, the mother and her children are eating dessert, and the mother wants another piece of cake, so she says to Kate "Is there more cake?" We ask a subject (3;9) what happens next, and she said that Kate got the second piece of cake. When we asked whether it wasn't, maybe, the mother who had wanted the cake, the little girl said "Of course not! Mothers don't have more cake, they're on diets!". Another example from the same story with another child went as follows. The mother said "I can't reach the cake." to Jack. So we asked the subject what she thought happened next. She said Jack said "I can". When we asked whether the mother didn't want Jack to cut her another piece, the little girl said "No, cuz kids can't use knives." This just shows that the unfamiliarilty with the role prevented us from getting as far as the child's understanding of the utterance.

The second subpart of the effect of experience with the role concerns how acceptable being implicated by that role was to the subject. Essentially, when you role play a character, you are responsible for the activities you make it engage in. When those activities are too naughty or unacceptable, it may be too damaging to admit knowing how that character should act. For example, in one story, Jack and Kate get into a fight, and the mother comes into the room but she doesn't say anything (this is a no voice/see condition). We ask the little boy what the mother could say to get the children to stop fighting. He answers that he doesn't know. So we personalized it, thinking that if the child was having trouble reasoning about abstract, hypothetical characters, we could overcome that problem by using people he knows. So we asked him what his mother would say to him is he got into a fight and she wanted him to quit. He answered "Oh, I don't know. I've never been in a fight before." We didn't buy that, so we tried another tac. We asked what his mother might say to his brother, if his brother were in a fight and his mother wanted him to stop. He had an answer right away ("She'd say 'Stop that fighting right away!'") Somehow, it was alright to admit second hand knowledge of this naughty scene, but it was not alright to admit having participated in it, at least not to adult experimenters who might not keep this information to themselves. This would be fine, except that as long as

the child is feigning ignorance, we don't get at how he's interpreted the indirect directive.

3.The third property has to do with how well routinized the scenario being role-played is. If the scenario is well enough built up, then the mother's utterance makes no difference. This was the case in the food throwing story. Whether the mother said anything or not, the kids knew that throwing food in the living room was definitely forbidden. But when the scenario was less clearly built up, the children didn't have enough information to go on from the nonverbal situation alone. For example, in the grocery bag/door story, where the kids are supposed to open the door for their mother, the subjects don't usually know what to do when the mother doesn't say anything. They either suggest that the children continue playing catch, and hit the mother or her groceries, or they have the mother join in the catch game, but they rarely suggested that the children would open the door unless there was a directive. When the mother did say something, that utterance served to draw the subjects' attention to the problem in the situation, and the subjects then offer compliant solutions--they have Jack and Kate open the door for the mother. So the import of the scenario on our results was that if the situation clearly spoke for itself, the subjects didn't have to pay attention to the directive to figure out what should be done. It was only in the less routinized scenarios that we found the speech, and the exact form it took, made a difference.

4. The fourth point we wanted to make was that as good as role play can be as a technique for eliciting judgments about utterances, it was inadequate as a means of deciding when the children were responding to the intent of the mother's utterances, in other words, its indirect-directive force, and when they were complying because her utterance had drawn their attention to a problem. In the first case, you can conlude that they understand the directive intent, in the second case, you can't. For example, when the mother's checker falls on the floor and she says "I can't find my checker.", one little boy makes Jack say "Here it is" and hand it back to her. Why, we asked. Because she <u>needed</u> it, he answers. Can we conclude that this subject understood she'd <u>wanted</u> it from his answer? No. We have to ask another sort of question to get at that. We have to ask something like "What did the mother mean when she said 'I can't find the

checker'?". That too would constitute a form of role play, since it would force the child to take the perspective of some other person, but it is a different task from the more direct form of role play where the children act out the characters.

In summary, then, we were interested in studying children's development of a very specific kind of linguistic sophistication, namely the understanding of indirect speech. To do this, we used an elicitation task which was a type of role play. In the course of doing this study, we realized that several properties of the role play task itself were influencing the types of data we were collecting, and interacting with what we were focussing on. These four properties were 1) the ability to build stories, and make exciting endings rather than follow predictable scripts; 2) the effect of the child's personal experience with the role he was supposed to play in order to interpret our directives, more specifically, whether they were familiar with it, and if they were, whether they found being implicated by the role acceptable; 3) the effect of how routinized the context the utterance was imbedded in was on how much the child needed to pay attention to the verbal component of the situation in order to figure out what was expected of the characters in the story; 4) we found that our role play technique was not suitable for deciding whether the utterance served to draw the child's attention to the problem that needed to be resolved, or whether the child was processing the intent of the mother's directive.

In conclusion, we discovered that role play is a very complex task. In order to make sense of our results, we found we had to look more closely at some of the properties of role play that interacted with the specific forms of speech we were interested in. Since role play is a good way to get children involved in the experiment, and since it is a popular technique, we wanted to encourage people to examine the uses they plan to make of role play, to make sure they anticipate some of the effects they will find. Role play is very pervasive, and if you think about it, many of the methods you are using in your research are probably forms of role play, and so you may find your results confounded, or at least more complex, because of properties similar to the ones we enumerated today. We think role play is an interesting technique, and well suited to many experiments. It should just be used advisedly.